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Brazil's Long-simmering Undercurrent

06/21/2013

The images of one million people descending upon Brazil's streets marks a game-changing moment in its historic evolution. However, it is essential that protests proceed peacefully as they can easily turn ugly. As the situation remains fluid, unpredictable dynamics can spill over into a vicious cycle of violence. In order to defuse the potential for increased bloody outbreaks, Brazilian law enforcement must strike a delicate balance between effective self-restraint and containing radical elements.

Brazil's traditionally complacent political establishment was baffled and completely caught off guard by the mass rallies. After a decade of rapid economic growth, one wonders how such protests could possibly materialize -- in particular, while Brazil is about to showcase itself on the global stage with the approaching 2014 Soccer World Cup and 2016 Rio Olympics. Many public officials fell victim to a false state of well-being believing that economic growth, increasing opportunity and an expanding middle-class would provide greater social stability.

Like many large social protest movements, dissent against a specific grievance may simply provide a pretext to a sudden display of broader and deeper grievances brewing over time. Rallies against increased bus fares in Sao Paulo, Brazil's economic capital, initially served as the catalyst for the current protests. However, the roots lie in a long-simmering undercurrent of dissatisfaction. Despite years of economic growth and other positive developments, many of Brazil's traditional ills still linger, including endemic corruption, poor public services and deficient infrastructure.

The current mass rallies may not exactly represent a great popular awakening as Brazilians have become more socially active over the years. However, it marks a massive reaction against the status quo, a loss of public patience and a firm popular demand for concrete government action against persisting afflictions.

During his presidency from 2003 to 2011, Mr. Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva made ordinary Brazilians feel part of the system. Now as newly enfranchised citizens, millions consider themselves direct stakeholders and participants in shaping Brazil's future. Not only do they aspire to a better future but want one now and a complete break with past practices.

Like so many other evolving countries around the world, change in Brazil is being driven from the bottom-up and not simply from the top-down. Ordinary Brazilians want to move on and create a more just and normal society. The majority of Brazil's politicians need to wake up to this reality. Failure to do so will only result in greater social upheaval with dramatic consequences for Brazil and the broader Latin American region.